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SUBJECT: FINDING ROOM FOR THE SYRIAC ORTHODOX IN ISTANBUL

¶1. (SBU) Summary. The Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan for Istanbul and Ankara Yusuf Cetin February 7 discussed the need for more Syriac Orthodox churches and clergy in Istanbul following the boom in the community's population in the 1990s. Cetin also noted that while some families are returning to their homes in the southeast following the community's exodus due to the anti-PKK raids in the 1990s, the numbers are not as great as the local municipalities suggest. Despite the challenges of the Syriac Orthodox in Turkey, the community in Iraq is facing much more significant problems, he said. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On February 7, the Consul General met with the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan for Istanbul and Ankara Archbishop Yusuf Cetin. According to Cetin - Metropolitan since 1986 - the current Syriac Orthodox community in Istanbul grew to nearly 20,000 after the forced relocation of many villages in the Southeast during anti-PKK raids in the 1990s. The Syriacs have only one church in Istanbul which, Cetin says, is not sufficient to meet the needs of the community. Currently, according to Cetin, they also borrow seven churches from other Orthodox denominations (nine during the summer, including two on the Princes' Islands) to provide services to their community. While the community board requested permission to build another church in Yesilkoy, they have yet to receive notice from the municipality that there is zoning for a church in the district. The president of the community's layman council said that they face difficulties in identifying a site for a church because the Syriacs are not a "recognized religious minority" and do not have "foundation" status. In addition to the need for additional churches in Istanbul, the Archbishop said there were insufficient clerics to provide services to the community in Istanbul. There are currently 28 Syriac Orthodox clergy and monks in Turkey, with seven in Istanbul.

¶3. (SBU) Following the relocation of many Syriac families from the Southeast in the early 1990s, some older families have returned to their homes. Cetin said that the locals in the region exaggerated the number of families that have actually returned, when in reality the number had been insignificant. Note: It is difficult for Post to get an accurate count of the number of families displaced or returned, and numbers vary widely depending on to whom we are speaking. End note.

¶4. (SUB) The Archbishop commented positively on the community's relationship with the central government and local municipality mayors. Community leadership meets regularly with GOT representatives from the MFA and State Minister Egemen Bagis. Cetin also emphasized the good relations with other minority religions and the Directorate for Religious Affairs.

¶5. (SBU) The Syriacs in Turkey are faring well compared to their Iraqi brethren Cetin confided. He reported that many are trying to flee Iraq now given the continuing rise in violence and poor treatment of the Syriacs and other Christian denominations in Iraq.

¶6. (SBU) Comment. While the conversation touched upon Mor Gabriel and Dareszarfulan Monasteries in Mardin and Midyat respectively, the Metropolitan did not mention the court cases involving Mor Gabriel. The Syriac Diaspora and several international human rights organizations highlight the cadastre court cases involving Mor Gabriel in Midyat (TDB July 29, 2009) as examples of encroachment on minority religious rights in Turkey. Cetin's choice not to mention the cases is consistent with his silence on the issue when meeting with President Obama in April 2009, and may indicate differing priorities among the metropolitans of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Turkey, who do not speak with one voice. End Comment.
WIENER